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AUTHOR Luftig, Richard L.
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ABSTRACT

Evidence suggests that a significant proportion of school children consider themselves lonely and isolated from peers. However, less data exists as to (1) the accuracy of children's perceived loneliness when compared with their reported popularity with peers; (2) specific behavioral attributes that might contribute to popularity; and (3) stability of popularity over a variety of school-related social situations. The present experiment measured the perceived loneliness, behavioral attributes, and actual popularity of 364 boys and girls in grades 2, 4, and 6. Students were recruited from two rural/suburban, middle class and racially mixed school districts in the Midwest. Materials consisted of a loneliness scale, in which students indicated the veracity of positive and negative statements as applied to themselves, and a sociometric peer-nominating form in which students nominated three classmates for each of 14 attributes. Children were tested in class groups in their regular classrooms. Developmental differences were found for both popularity and perceived loneliness. Both developmental and gender differences were found for the importance of such variables as sense of humor, moodiness/sadness, creativity, and athletic and academic ability. Popularity was more stable over social situations (i.e., classroom projects and athletic activities) for girls than for boys. Results were discussed in light of a theory of social metacognition. (Author/CB)

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The Reality of Children's Loneliness: The Relationship Between Feelings of Isolation, Peer Popularity and Behavioral Attributes

Richard L. Luftig

Miami University

Author Address:

Educational Psychology Department

201 McGuffey Hall

Miami University

Oxford, Ohio 45056

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Running head: Reality of Children's Loneliness

Abstract

There is evidence to suggest that a significant proportion of school children consider themselves lonely and isolated from peers. However less data exists as to (a) the realism of children's perceived loneliness as a function of their actual popularity with peers, (b) specific behavioral attributes which might contribute to popularity, and (c) stability of popularity over a variety of school related social situations. The present experiment measured the perceived loneliness, behavioral attributes and actual popularity of 365 boys and girls in grades 2, 4, and 6. Developmental differences were found for both popularity, and perceived loneliness, while both developmental and gender differences were found for the importance of such variables as sense of humor, moodiness/sadness, creativity, and athletic and academic ability. Popularity was more stable over social situations for girls than for boys. Results are discussed in light of a theory of social metacognition.

The Reality of Children's Loneliness: The Relationship Between Feelings of Isolation, Peer Popularity and Behavioral Attributes

The past decade has seen a great interest in research in children's social relationship with peers (e.g. Asher, 1984; Asher et al., 1983; Ladd, 1983; Sherman, 1984a). Much of this increased interest stems from beliefs that children with poor peer relations constitute an "at-risk" population who will experience poorer social social learning opportunities (Luftig, 1983 a & b; Ogden & Asher, 1977), who are likely to demonstrate future mental-health adjustment problems (Asher, 1984; Cowen et al., 1973; Coie & Dodge, 1983).

More recent inquiry has begun to look at children's social relations as a function of both the children's behavioral attributes as well as the social "metacognition" - that underlies that behavior (Asher et al., 1980; Ladd, 1983; Ladd & Oden, 1979; Renshaw & Asher, 1983). According to Flavell (1977), social metacognition consists of the child's knowledge base about the rules which governs social relations. It represents the framework by which the child learns and employees social strategies as well as how s/he interprets incoming social information. Social metacognition is often reflected by the child metaphorically asking such social questions as "What is going on here," "What are others doing," "Why are they acting this way," and "What am I suppose to do?" (Green, 1976).

There is evidence to suggest that popular and unpopular children differ both in their social metacognition and in possession of a behavioral repetoire for dealing with other children. For example, data indicates that unpopular children are less resourceful and strategic than their normal peers (Asher & Renshaw, 1981), that their strategies are likely to be highly non-normative (Ladd & Oden, 1979), and that their ability to interpret incoming social information is relatively undifferentiated and unsophisticated (Asher et al., 1980). In terms of behavioral attributes, unpopular children have been found to be relatively more aggressive than

their popular peers (Asher et al., 1980; Renshaw & Asher, 1983) as well as friendlier (Renshaw & Asher, 1983), more humorous, and less shy (Sherman, 1984b). Thus, differences between popular and unpopular children appear to be both qualitative and quanitative.

The question may be raised as to the extent that social metacognition plays in popular and unpopular children's realistic interpretation of their social status. Put another way, how realistic are children in their assessment of their own relative loneliness? For example, we have all met people who claim to be lonely and isolated even though their telephone "rings off the wall" with people seeking their company. Such individuals obviously are not very realistic in their assessments of their isolation. The current research sought to gather data regarding the veracity of children's perceived loneliness as a function of their actual popularity. It was hypothesized that developmental differences would exist in accurate interpretation of information regarding popularity.

The second purpose of the study was to gather developmental data on behavioral attributes which children consider important in assigning popular or unpopular status to peers in school. Measurement of attributes have been attempted previously (e.g. Coie & Dodge, 1984; Coie & Kuperschmidt, 1984; Dodge et al., 1984). However, less research has been carried out regarding the correlation between the assignment of behavioral attributes to children and those children's assignments of popularity. This question might even become more important if it were found that attributes of popularity shift as a function of development and gender.

A final purpose of the study was to investigate the stability of peer choices of popularity over a variety of school related situations. For example, suppose a child was asked to name a child s/he would like to work with on a academic project, creative project, or have for a teammate in a game or sport. Would the rater choose his/her mate on the basis of general popularity or as a perception of other children's skills in academics, creativity, or sports respectively? Put another

way, what would win out, popularity or the child's motivation to succeed? Additionally, would patterns of choices change as a function of social metacognition or would they be stable throughout development? Answers to such questions were sought in the current research design.

Method

Subjects: Subjects in the study were 364 elementary school students in grades 2, 4, and 6 (grade 2, n=110; grade 4, n=139; grade 6, n=117). Gender of subject was relatively equal (male, n=193; female, n=171). Students were recruited from two rural/suburban, middle class and racially mixed school districts in Southwest Ohio and Southeast Indiana. Students were allowed to participate in the study if they met the following criteria (a) parental and student consent, (b) a chronological age no less or greater than 9 months from the mean of their class, (c) student has not been retained or skipped an academic grade in school. All students participating were attending school full-time and resided at home with a parent or guardian.

Materials: Materials consisted of a scale designed to measure student loneliness and a peer popularity/attribute scale. The loneliness scale consisted of a 24 item, five-point Likert-type scale originally developed by Asher et al., (1983) and modified by the present author. Children were asked to indicate veracity of statements as applied to themselves on a five-point scale ranging from "That's always true about me" to "That's not true about me at all." The items in the scale were counter-balanced for positive and negative statements so as to discourage response set. The validity and reliability of this instrument was ascertained in a pilot study by the present author as well as by Asher et al. (1983). In the pilot study, test-retest reliability on a sample of 20 students was r=.76. Additionally, the test showed concurrent validity with teacher ratings of lonely children. A copy of this instrument may be obtained from the author.

The popularity/behavioral attribute instrument used was a sociometric peer nominating form. It consisted of 14 items originally designed by Sherman (1982,

1984a) and modified by the present author. For each item, the respondent nominated three classmates who possessed that attribute. Items required nominations for questions regarding like and dislike, the best children in the class in creative endeavors, sports, and academics, the funniest and moodiest/sadest children, best-looking, leaders and followers, and nominations for whom the respondent would like to eat lunch, invite to her/his birthday party, have on her/his team, work on a project with, and have over to the house after school. An assessment of reliability of this instrument yielded reliability coefficients of r=.68; r=.76 and r=.74 for grades 2, 4 and 6 respectively.

Method

All children were tested in class groups in their regular classrooms. Children sat in a semi-circle in order to face one another. Additionally, names of students who were absent from school on the day of testing were placed on the blackboard for children to refer. Absent students were tested at a later date. While the experimenter asked the questions, two assistants circulated around the classroom making sure that students remained on-task.

For each class, the order of data collection was perceived loneliness, and sociometric peer nominations. After each instrument was administered, students were permitted a 1-2 minute "exercise" break. The entire testing procedure took approximately 40 minutes.

Data Scoring and Preparation

For the loneliness scale, items were first adjusted for direction (whether statements indicated "loneliness" or "nonloneliness"). Responses on the 24 items were then summed for each child. Loneliness scores could thus range from 24-120, with lower scores reflecting higher levels of perceived loneliness.

The peer nomination data underwent both a weighting procedure and an adjustment for class size. For each of the 14 items, a student was given a score whenever she/he was nominated by another child. Scores ranged from "3" if the child was the

respondent's first choice, to "2" or "1" depending upon if the child was the respondent's second or third choice. Although advocates exist for both unweighted and weighted scoring procedures (Asher et al., 1979; Gottman, 1977; Hymel, 1973; Vaugn & Waters, 1981), it was believed that using a weighting procedure was sound based on the nature of the task in the present experiment. After weighting, scores for each child were summed. Finally, each child's summed score for each item was divided by the number of total students in that particular class, thus yielding a proportion. This procedure was carried out so as to equate for class size, since without this correction, children from smaller classes had a higher probability of being nominated than children from larger classes. Thus, the greater the proportion, the more that a child was nominated by peers on a given item.

Results

Data were analyzed in a variety of ways; by grade and sex differences in perceived loneliness, by the agreement of a child's perceived loneliness with his measured popularity among peers, by the relative contribution of behavioral attributes to popularity/unpopularity, and by agreement and stability of peer choices among children over a variety of social situations.

Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations for students loneliness scores. A multivariate analyses of variance was carried out on perceived loneliness by grade and sex. A significant main effect was found for grade ($DF,2,358,F=26.55,p<.001$). There were significant differences between all grades such that the higher the grade the greater the degree of perceived loneliness ($p<.01$).

Insert Table 1 about here

The 14 variables of the sociometric popularity scale were submitted to factor analysis with four main factors emerging; popular, unpopular, attribute, and reflection. Popular referred to answers to the question of the three children in

the class that the respondent liked the most, while unpopular was a reflection of whom the child liked the least. Attribute referred to behavioral attributes which contributed to popularity or unpopularity (creativity, athletic ability, sense of humor, academic achievement, and moodiness/sadness). Finally, reflected consisted of situational antecedents in which supposedly popularity would have an influence on student choices (choosing people to work with on a project, eat lunch with, invite to a party, have for a friend, have over after school). Table 2 contains the grade x sex scores for the four factors.

Insert Table 2 about here

Multivariate analyses of variance of student responses on the four factors by grade and sex were carried out as well as analyses of the 14 unfactored variables by grade and sex. When the 14 variables were grouped into the four factors (popular, unpopular, attribute, and reflect), a main effect of grade was found for popular ($DF,2,358,F=3.40,p<.03$) while for the attribute factor, grade ($DF,2,358,F=4.20, p \leq .01$), sex ($DF,1,358,F=11.18,p<.001$) and the sex x grade interaction were found to be significant ($DF,2,358,F=3.01, p<.05$). For the factor of popularity, scores were higher in grade 2 than in grades 4 and 6 ($p<.05$). For the factor of attribute, male second grade students possessed significantly higher popularity scores than all other sex x grade groups ($p<.01$).

Analyses of the 14 popularity variables (unfactored) by grade and sex were also conducted. Grade was found to be significant for moodiness/sadness ($DF,2,358,F=2.94, p<.05$), choosing someone to work with on a project ($DF,2,358,F=3.59, p<.03$), inviting the child to a party ($DF,2,358,F=3.31, p<.03$), choosing a child as a friend ($DF,2,358,F=3.65, p<.03$), and having over to your house after school ($F=3.41, p<.03$). Sex was found to be significant for athletic ability ($DF,1,358,F=67.28,p<.001$), sense of humor ($DF,1,358,F=39.43,p<.001$), academic

achievement (DF,1,358,F=4.17,p<.04), and having the child as a team member (DF,1,358,F=29.45, p<.001). Finally a significant grade x sex interaction was found for academic achievement (DF2,358,F=6.96,p<.001). The academic achievement interaction was such that academic achievement contributed least to popularity for male 4th and 6th grade students and female 2nd grade students, and contributed most to popularity for female 4th and 6th grade students and for male 2nd grade students (p<.01). Regarding moodiness/sadness, all grades differed significantly from one another in rating its contribution to popularity; 6th grade students exhibiting moodiness/sadness were least popular and 4th graders considered it least important in rating popularity. Finally, it was found that boys placed more value both on athletic ability and on sense of humor than girls in ratings of peer popularity (p < .01)

An analysis was conducted to measure the extent to which a child's loneliness score was in agreement with her/his popularity among classmates. Put another way, the analysis was conducted to gauge the extent to which childrens' loneliness scores were versed in reality. Table 3 shows children's correlation scores between their perceived loneliness, their actual popularity, and behavioral attributes contributing to popularity. For both 2nd grade girls and boys and for 4th grade boys, loneliness was unrelated to any of the scores on the peer popularity/attribute rating instruments. For 4th grade girls, loneliness was positively associated with both popularity and sense of humor in that the greater the perceived loneliness, the less the child's popularity and rated sense of humor. Finally, while no relationship between loneliness and popularity variables were found for 6th grade boys, for 6th grade girls, a significant relationship was found between girl's loneliness score, popularity and moodiness/sadness. The greater the perceived loneliness the lower the actual popularity and attributed sadness.

Insert Table 3 about here

A final analysis was conducted to judge whether popularity remained stable over a variety of school related social situations or whether it was more situationally dictated. For each grade x gender group, the relationship between the questions "name the children you would most like to be on a team with" and "you like to work on a class project with" were measured against the peer popularity question and the specific questions of "name three children who are best in sports and games" and "who are the best in school." Correlations between popularity and the "team" and "project" questions as well as between the "team" and "project" questions and the best at sports and school achievement were calculated and t-tests were conducted to assess differences by grade and sex. Table 4 shows the correlations for the sets of questions. For boys at all grade levels, sports ability was more important than general popularity for choosing a teammate ($p<.01$). For 4th grade and 6th grade boys, however, general popularity was more important than academic achievement in choosing a partner for a class project ($p<.01$). For girls in all grades, general popularity was more important than achievement ability in choosing a partner for a class project ($p<.01$), while for 2nd grade and 6th grade girls, general popularity was more important than prowess in choosing a teammate in a game or sport ($p<.01$). No differences for sport/game was found for 4th grade girls.

Insert Table 4 about here

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceived loneliness and actual popularity of boys and girls at different grade levels. Children were administered loneliness and peer nomination assessment instruments in which the attributes which may contribute to popularity were also assessed.

A major finding was that age differences appear to exist for perceived

loneliness; the higher the grade, the greater the degree of loneliness. This finding takes on even greater significance when combined with the trend for children's decreased popularity scores as a function of grade. It may be that in the higher grades, certain normative standards of behavior are imposed and children who do not "live up" to these standards suffer in popularity. This results in an overall decrease in popularity for a significant proportion of students who do not meet the normative standards. Such decreases in popularity are reflected in feelings of loneliness and isolation. It appears that these findings hold for both boys and girls as they grow older in elementary school. Evidently, for older children loneliness and feelings of isolation does not sexually discriminate.

It was found that the attributes contributing to popularity were different for boys and girls and for children of different developmental levels. For example, a "u" shaped function existed for "moodiness/sadness" across gender with sixth graders considering the attribute as contributing greatly to unpopularity while fourth graders considered it less important. The finding that moodiness/sadness is a major contributer to unpopularity for older children combined with these children's actual and perceived loneliness possesses implications for the ways that such children handle their loneliness. At least for older children, a vicious cycle of unpopularity loneliness moodiness/sadness increased unpopularity may be occurring. In such cases, children may be reacting to their unpopularity/loneliness in ways that help insure further unpopularity and isolation. For such children, it would appear that some sort of social/therapeutic training may be warranted.

The finding of sex and grade differences for the contribution of academic achievement to popularity was interesting. Academic achievement was an important factor in popularity for female 4th and 6th grade students and for 2nd grade boys. However, for older boys it was not significantly correlated with popularity. Since there is evidence to suggest a higher level of achievement by girls during the elementary school years (Bee, 1974; Hoffman, 1972; MacCoby & Jacklin, 1974), it may

be that decreased attribution of academic achievement to popularity by older boys may represent a defensive posture designed for ego protection from academic low achievement or failure. If so, then a situation which favors a lack of academic achievement for popularity among older boys would be working at cross-differences with the state purpose of schooling.

The finding for sex differences for sense of humor and athletic ability as a contributor to popularity was also found. As expected, athletic prowess was considered more important by boys than by girls. However, the finding that sense of humor was more important for boys than girls was problematic. It may be that sense of humor may be seen as part of an overall factor of gregariousness/extravertness. If so, children who are viewed as outgoing or even boistrous may be seen in a more positive light by boys than girls. Some evidence for this came from informal interviews with students of both sexes, who participated in the present study. While boys generally like and admired the child (usually a boy) who was funny and irrelevant during class, girls often saw the same person as a "class clown" who frequently got other classmates in trouble. Such findings hold implications as to how children at different developmental levels define humor both in and out of the classroom

A central purpose of the study was to measure whether popularity was stable across a variety of social situations or whether it was more situationally determined. A differential pattern appeared for boys and girls. For boys, while athletic prowess was more important than general popularity in choosing a teammate, overall popularity was more important than academic ability in choosing a classmate for a class project. For girls, however, general popularity was more important than academic ability in choosing aproject partner and (for two grade groups with the 4th grade showing insignificant differences) was also more important than prowess in choosing a teammate. Thus, it would appear that for girls, popularity is more stable across school situations while for boys it is more situationally determined.

Why this is so remains a question. Perhaps, it has to do with cultural expectations that boys be competitive. In such cases, winning in athletics would be more important than considerations of popularity. However, in less important situations (at least to the boys) such as academics, general popularity would be more important than finding a project partner who was "smart." It is believed that this finding of increased stability of popularity across school situations for girls and relative changing popularity as a function of situation for boys deserves further study.

The final analysis had to do with the relationship between perceived loneliness, actual peer popularity, and rated behavioral attributes which contribute to popularity. For the youngest students in the study (2nd grade), no relationship existed between actual popularity and perceived loneliness. However, for 4th grade and 6th grade girls, a child's perceived loneliness was significantly related to that child's actual popularity as well as to the other children's perceptions of her sense of humor and her moodiness/sadness. Thus, both developmental and gender trends appeared. Theorists and researchers have advocated a theory of social metacognition which would operate in much the same way as its cognitive counterpart (Chandler, 1977; Flavell, 1974; Flavell & Ross, 1981; Luftig, 1983 a&b). Developmental trends of social cognition would suggest an increased awareness and sensitivity to social information from others as the child matures. Also interesting, was the finding of keener and more accurate social awareness by girls as to their own popularity. Findings of increased social skills and perceptiveness by females have been demonstrated by other investigators (Eder & Hallinan, 1978; Macoby & Jacklin, 1974; McDaniels, 1983; Sherman, 1984 a&b). However, the current finding of the ability of girls to appropriate receive and interpret social information and then use that information as a homeostatic mechanism to moderate their affective feelings demonstrates a heightened social metacognition not previously demonstrated. Such abilities may be a mixed blessing; while it brings the child into closer congruence with the "reality" of his/her social situation, at

the same time it can lead to increased feelings of alienation and diminished self-concept (Felker & Stanwyck, 1971). In order to maintain feelings of non-loneliness in the face of actual popularity, ignorance may be bliss.

It appears that further research in the area of children's perceived loneliness and actual popularity needs to be conducted. Such research might hold implications in therapeutic environments. For the most part, efforts to design intervetnion techniques to decrease the social isolation of unpopular children have either met with mixed or unsuccessful results (Chenault, 1967; Lilly, 1971; Oden & Asher, 1977). Perhaps one reason for this may be due to incomplete knowledge about the behavioral attributes along which students rate popularity. It is believed that increased knowledge about what children value in their peers will help in training students to better exhibit such attributes.

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Table 1

Pearson Correlations Between Each Child's Locus of Control Score and His/Her Rated Popularity and Possession of Behavioral Attributes

	Loneliness	Liked Most	Liked Least	Art	Sad	Sports	Funny
Grade 2, Males							
Locus of Control	-.21*	.14	-.09	.19	.10	.22*	-.02
Grade 2, Females							
Locus of Control	.14	.11	-.24*	.25*	-.43**	.19	-.03
Grade 4, Males							
Locus of Control	.17	.08	.11	.20*	-.02	.14	.14
Grade 4, Females							
Locus of Control	.02	.33**	-.23*	.07	-.03	.14	-.06
Grade 6, Males							
Locus of Control	-.02	-.02	-.09	-.02	-.09	-.08	-.08
Grade 6, Females							
Locus of Control	.25*	.05	-.10	.09	-.34**	-.24*	.09

*=p<.05

**p=<.01

Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations of Proportions for Rated Nominations Factors of Popular, Unpopular, Attribute and Reflected by Grade and Sex

	Mean	Standard Deviation
Popular		
Sex: Male		
Grade 2	.34	.30
Grade 4	.25	.21
Grade 6	.25	.15
Sex: Female		
Grade 2	.31	.24
Grade 4	.27	.21
Grade 6	.26	.24
Unpopular		
Sex: Male		
Grade 2	.29	.30
Grade 4	.31	.42
Grade 6	.26	.27
Sex: Female		
Grade 2	.35	.41
Grade 4	.17	.21
Grade 6	.22	.35
Attribute		
Sex: Male		
Grade 2	.36	.28
Grade 4	.24	.18
Grade 6	.24	.18

<u>Sex: Female</u>		
Grade 2	.21	.13
Grade 4	.22	.19
Grade 6	.19	.19
<u>Reflected</u>		
<u>Sex: Male</u>		
Grade 2	.41	.34
Grade 4	.33	.31
Grade 6	.35	.22
<u>Sex: Female</u>		
Grade 2	.37	.21
Grade 4	.35	.23
Grade 6	.30	.30

Table 3

Pearson Correlations Between a Child's Perceived Loneliness Score, Rated Popularity and Behavioral Attributes by Sex and Grade

	Like Most	Like Least	Art	Sad	Sports	Funny
Grade 2: Male						
Loneliness	.07	.10	-.02	-.03	-.02	.01
Grade 2: Female						
Loneliness	.01	.19	.06	-.01	-.06	.11
Grade 4: Male						
Loneliness	-.11	.00	.05	.13	-.08	-.07
Grade 4: Female						
Loneliness	.20*	.07	.06	.04	-.19	-.20*
Grade 6: Male						
Loneliness	.04	.10	-.05	-.11	.00	-.06
Grade 6: Female						
Loneliness	-.00	.34**	-.11	-.39**	.05	.09

*=$p \leq .05$

**=$p \leq .01$

Table 4

Correlations Between General Popularity, Ability in Sports, Academic Achievement, and Choosing a Teammate and Classmate to Work on a Class Project (by Grade and Sex)

	Teammate	Project Classmate
Grade 2 - Boys		
General Popularity	.77	.79
Sports Ability	.90	—
Academic Achievement	—	.70
Grade 2 - Girls		
General Popularity	.67	.59
Sports Ability	.39	—
Academic Achievement	—	.48
Grade 4 - Boys		
General Popularity	.66	.79
Sports Ability	.90	—
Academic Achievement	—	.26
Grade 4 - Girls		
General Popularity	.63	.75
Sports Ability	.64	—
Academic Achievement	—	.64
Grade 6 - Boys		
General Popularity	.56	.80
Sports Ability	.91	—
Academic Achievement	—	.47
Grade 6 - Girls		
General Popularity	.78	.87

Sports Ability	.78	—
Academic Achievement	—	.59